

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM: USCIRF BRIEFING WITH LUDMILA MIKHAILOVNA ALEKSEEVA, RUSSIAN HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCATE

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U.S.COMMISSION
ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
WASHINGTON, D.C.



Ludmila Mikhailovna Alekseeva addresses crowd about religious freedom in Russia.

Transcript by:
Federal News Service
Washington, D.C.

[Note: The remarks of Ludmila Mikhailovna Alekseeva and Daniil Meshcheryakov are made through a translator.]

CATHERINE COSMAN: Okay, I think we should start although I'm sure a few more people will be coming in. (Confers off side.)

So of many people, it's often said that people are tireless defenders of human rights, but in the case of Ludmila Alekseeva, that - and Daniil Meshcheryakov this phrase, is all the more true. And as you all know because you are here, Ludmila is the president of the Moscow Helsinki Group and she has brought with her two colleagues: Daniil Meshcheryakov, who is the executive director, and Anastaisa Asieva (ph), who is the administrative director - all of the Moscow Helsinki Group, which is one of the oldest and most distinguished human rights groups in Russia existing from Soviet times, as you know from the bio.

I would also like to thank Nicoli Butchavich (ph), who I hope will be joining us soon, who is the research and advocacy director from the Union of Councils for Soviet Jewry who helped us set up this meeting and other meetings for you here in town.

Just to let you know that there is information about the commission over here about the report we did on Russia, and a brochure of information about the commission and our most recent annual report. So, since time is short, I think we should get started. Oh, one other thing I think we should do, if people don't mind, is going around the room, and introducing ourselves just so we have some idea of who is here and we can get to know each other. There is some old

friends in the room but a lot of new faces too.

CHARLES FENYVESI: Charley Fenyvesi. I'm editor of The Bigotry Monitor.

JONATHAN GALLAGHER: Jonathan Gallagher representing the International Religious Liberty Association and also the Seventh Adventist Church, and also - (inaudible).

ROBERT ARSENAULT: Bob Arsenault of the International League for Human Rights.

JOSEPH CRAPA: Joe Crapa. I'm the executive director of the Commission on International Religious Freedom. And on behalf of the commissioners and the commission, we welcome you very much to this session, and particularly to - (inaudible) - I have a miserable cold that's why - (inaudible).

MR. : (Inaudible) -- visiting scholar - (inaudible) - Institute.

WALTER GRAZER: Walt Grazer with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

KNOX THAMES: Knox Thames with the U.S. Helsinki Commission.

PATRICIA CARLEY: Patricia Carley and I'm with the commission.

DAVID DETTONI: David Dettoni. I'm with the commission here as well.

KEITH PETERS: Keith Peters with Family News in Focus.

MR. : (Inaudible.)

ANASTASIA ASIEVA: Anastasia Asieva and I'm administrative director in the Moscow Helsinki Group.

DANIIL MESHCHERYAKOV: Daniil Meshcheryakov, executive director of the Moscow Helsinki Group.

MR. : (Inaudible, laughter).

FRANK GUEST: I'm Frank Guest with the Federal News Service.

MS. : I'm Fleur - (inaudible) - from - (inaudible.)

MS. : Alison - (inaudible) - I'm on the commission.

MS. : Veronica - (inaudible).

BRIAN OGIE (PH): Brian Ogie, Senator - (inaudible, background noise) -- office.

AMY ALLENSON (PH): Amy Allenson - (inaudible, background noise).

ANNE JOHNSON: Anne Johnson - (off mike).

MS. : (Inaudible) - Voice of America, Russian Service.

JOSHUA PEARSON: Joshua Pearson, Greater Strength of Jerusalem.

STEVE FORD: Steve Ford with Renewed Strength Church.

MR. : (Off mike.)

JEAN VIRGIL: Jean Virgil Senator Clinton's office.

MR. : (Inaudible.)

LAUREN LEFFLER: Lauren Leffler - (inaudible) - U.S. Helsinki Commission.

GARY VOCHELITE (PH): Gary Vochelite from SRN News.

SHELLY SULLIVAN: Shelly Sullivan, director of an international organization that is concerned with the rights of prisoners and the rights of prisoners being used for - (inaudible).

LUDMILA MIKHAILOVNA ALEKSEEVA: Thank you all coming and for showing interest in my country and the issues which we will be discussing today. We will be discussing today the situation of religious freedom and even though I have been concerned with the issues of human rights in Russia for 40 years, every time I say, well, unfortunately, the situation is getting worse. And every time I am speaking the truth. (Chuckles.) And the same is true of religious freedom.

Well, actually, there was one time when I could say that the situation of religious freedom in Russia was better and that is immediately after the adoption of the Russian Constitution and the first law on religion when the situation of religious believers, regardless of their faith was good.

But unfortunately, with adoption of the new law on religion in 1997, the equality of citizens under the law regardless of their religious confession was violated. I'm sure everyone here knows that basically religions were divided in Russia into three categories: those considered most traditional, those considered less traditional, and new religions. And the new religions have the least rights. But I should say that the observation and enforcement of this law has gotten - is worse than the law itself and every year that passes, enforcement of the law goes further and further from constitutionally-guaranteed rights.

What has happened in the last year which are particularly negative phenomena in this area? The first issue of concern to human rights and other people concerned with the issue of religious freedom are efforts to clericalize (ph) education in high schools. And it is the patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church who is the initiator of this act. A high school text was prepared, the basis of which was the - the intention of which was to advocate the ideas of the Russian Orthodox Church. And the idea of this course was that it would be included in all -- as an obligatory subject.

And this course was supposed to be followed in all areas of Russia, even in areas where, say, Muslim populations were in the majority. Nevertheless, they were all supposed to study Russian Orthodox culture as the basis of Russian history. This idea was very favorably looked upon by the federal authorities and the Russian Ministry of Education.

Fortunately, this effort resulted in - produced a very stormy public response. The media took part in this discussion and there were scholarly studies of whether or not schools were in a position to actually carry out such studies - such education. And there were also sociological surveys to ask which regions of Russia were prepared to undertake such courses.

And it emerged that even in areas where the majority population were Russian Orthodox, the parents did not want such courses in their schools. But probably this was not enough to stop this effort because, after all, the authorities don't really take the opinion of the populous very seriously. But I was very pleasantly surprised by the fact that most teachers -- an overwhelming majority of teachers said that they did not want to carry out such education.

Human rights activists took to court the author of this textbook for incitement of religious hostility and this author fully deserved such a court case. And because the author closely linked the idea of being Russia with the traditions and ideas of Russian Orthodox, the Russian human rights activists won the court case. And as a result, school textbooks now - it was decided to introduce a course about world religions instead. And this of course is a completely different approach to the issue. But since no fitting textbook was available on the history of world religions, the whole issue has been delayed for several years while an appropriate textbook is being prepared.

So for now this danger has been postponed. The danger of a very extremist - and because the only people who could teach such a course - who teach such a course are Russian Orthodox priests, many of whom are reactionary and not qualified or well educated enough to properly teach such a course. And teachers of such a subject simply don't exist. And after all, most teachers are people who grew up in the Soviet period and did not have any access to religious literature. Nevertheless, despite this defeat, there are still efforts in various quarters to introduce this type of subject.

The Moscow Helsinki Group appealed - worked with - the citizens of Uromosk (ph) appealed to the Moscow Helsinki group. This city is a mixed population of Russian Orthodox and Muslims and complained about such efforts. Among other complaints about discrimination of the Muslim Tatar population, there was the following. A Russian Orthodox priest came to the school and asked those who were baptized to raise their hands, and the Russians in the group raised their hands. And so for the remaining children in the classroom, without asking their permission, he baptized the rest -- namely mostly Tatar children. (Chuckles.) I can give other such examples from other parts of Russia.

In addition to this problem, I think one needs to call attention to another serious issue and that is very frequently, in various parts of Russia, the local population is becoming increasingly aggressive towards non-Russians or non-Russian-Orthodox and they are encouraged in this mood by local officials. And this is true of all religions: Islam, Judaism, and other Christian religions - that includes Protestants, Catholics, and even Russian Orthodox who are not part of the patriarchate. And these kinds of incitement or encouragement of popular sentiments can easily lead to and has led to acts of violence against other religions.

We get lots and lots of complaints about acts of violence directed against houses of worship of many different denominations. There are raids, there are attacks on say, Baptists who are

gathered together for prayer services. The local press is filled with stupidities and very nasty attacks on various religions including Jews and Adventists. The privileged position of the Russian Orthodox Church is also shown in the fact that only Russian Orthodox priests are allowed to take confessions from soldiers, even though of course in the Russian Army there are people serving of many different religions. And of course one can say the same about prisoners.

And unfortunately, one must say that during the Soviet period, the old Russian Orthodox tradition of charitable work has died. With the exception of the initiative of individual priests, for the most part, Russian Orthodox priests, when they, say, have access to prisons will conduct spiritual work but will not engage in charitable work - (inaudible, cross talk). But when Baptists or Catholics appeal to the local prison authorities and say we just want to give our fellow believers or a prisoner a blanket or water when it is hot, the prison authorities say, oh, no, you can't come into the prison because they are not - supposedly it's forbidden to conduct religious work in prisons.

Immediately after the adoption of the law on religion, there were many new places of worship that were opening in - being opened in Russia - mosques and Baptist prayer houses et cetera. But now, unfortunately, either due to the personal initiative of local authorities or due to pressure from the Russian Orthodox Church, buildings of non-Orthodox confessions are either being destroyed and sometimes even the plots of land on which they were built are being taken away from the religious communities. But one has to say that if these communities do appeal to courts, then usually they win these cases. But unfortunately, what often happens after that is then the churches are either burned or other acts of vandalism are carried out against them.

But let me say in conclusion that I myself come from a traditional Russian Orthodox family. And I am very ashamed of the fact that the patriarch of my church behaves in such a stupid and aggressive manner. And finally, if people are interested in asking me questions about an important case against the director of the mosque - of The Sahrah (ph) Foundation for organizing an exhibit questioning the social role of the Russian Orthodox Church, an ongoing trial against him, I would be happy to respond to such questions if this case is not known to you. I am very happy to answer questions.

MS. COSMAN: I did not mention one other thing which I should have and which is Monday of Next week, the commission is holding a hearing on Religion and Russia and there are press releases about that available. We will be having three witnesses on Islam, Christianity, and anti-Semitism, and other forms of extremism and Nicolai Butchavich, who is sitting opposite of me will be one of our speakers. So I'll open the floor to questions.

Q: One question: do you see a relationship between the Putin government and the Russian Orthodox Church in all of this?

MS. ALEKSEEVA: Well, there are rumors to that effect, but I can't say exactly. One can say that President Putin's spiritual father is a rather gloomy figure - murky - (inaudible, cross talk). But my guess would be that these initiatives come from the patriarchate, not from President Putin. At least that is how it looks from the outside.

MS. COSMAN: Could you also introduce yourself before you give the questions.

Q: Yes, I am James Vigil, Senator Clinton's office. I was just curious as to what impact the ecumenical efforts by the Pope and others have had in attempting to - other churches I guess reaching out to the Orthodox patriarchate that has had any positive impact in the - (off mike) - future.

MS. ALEKSEEVA: Yes, other churches do attempt to improve relations with the Russian Orthodox Church, but as you know, in the case of the pope, it's a highly complex relationship. And even though the Dali Lama was recently allowed to come to Russia, his movements were extremely limited to the Kalmykia - to the area where Buddhists live. So the Russian Orthodox Church does not always respond in a positive way to efforts to maintain or improve relations with other churches.

Q: Knox Thames with the Helsinki Commission. A question about the letter that came out, I believe, last week - had the 500 signatures. (Inaudible, cross talk.) I am interested on your take on that and does this - is this just a fringe group or does this represent a broader sentiment in Russian society.

MS. ALEKSEEVA: Well, there haven't been sociological surveys about this issue - whether or not people see themselves as anti-Semitic. But my personal impression about the situation in the country - that the political elite in the country is much more xenophobic and anti-Semitic than the population as a whole. I don't want to call them an elite because in Russia, elite has a positive connotation, so the top leaders I suppose is a more neutral - this is very dangerous

because they control the mass media, they can speak publicly with a wide audience, and of course, they can influence public opinion in the direction they would like.

Q: Walt Grazer with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. I have two questions. The first is do you seem this mostly as a problem of local officials who exercise inappropriate authority? Or does this problem run all the way from the top government officials in Moscow through the system?

The second question is do you see some of the problems with the Orthodox mostly because of Patriarch Alexei? Presumably - I know his health is not good. You know, if his replacement would be more open or do you think this is something more structurally built into Orthodox leadership?

MS. ALEKSEEVA: I think to a significant degree, the local incidents are the initiative of the local officials. I think these incidents occur not so much because these officials are so devotedly Russian Orthodox but simply because they are horribly ignorant about religion. They sincerely believe that Baptists are a dangerous sect that are dangerous to public health and morals. But, however, if top level officials were to decisively act against such incidents, then of course they wouldn't be so widespread, and if they acted according to the law because such actions are anti-constitutional and illegal, and they should be - and there are articles in the criminal code under which such actions should be prosecuted and can be prosecuted.

And Daniil added that the procuracy should initiate actions on - lawsuits on the basis - in response to such activities. I personally spoke to the general procurator of Russia on this topic in a personal discussion and for some reason he decided to become - well, to open his heart on this topic. And he said something amazing for a general procurator. The general procurator said, well, how can one get people to obey the law? You first have to get them to believe in God and only after that will they start obeying the law, which is a rather amazing statement from the chief law enforcement officer of Russia.

So this what the general procurator believes and probably many others as well. So the suspicion is that if one believes in Allah, then of course this is an entirely different matter and more dangerous. I was about to say - I should have said that it is particularly difficult for believers in Islam in Russia today. Unfortunately, all too many people in Russia now equate being a Muslim and being a terrorist.

And your second question?

Q: It's about the leadership in the Orthodox Church.

MS. ALEKSEEVA: I don't know if it's due to the personal initiative of Patriarch Alexei. He is very old and very ill and I believe he doesn't really do that much himself. I think most of these initiatives come from the younger people in his entourage. I don't know them personally and I can't say who is who.

Q: (Speaks in Russian.)

MS. ALEKSEEVA: For already six years, we have been trying to help the Jehovah's Witnesses. Throughout Russia, there about 400 communities of Jehovah's Witnesses and they have all be officially registered in Kazan and Moscow. In Moscow, for six years, we have been trying to gain - to assist the Jehovah's Witnesses of whom there are about 10,000 in Moscow to get a official registration. What is told about them in official circles - one could spend an entire seminar just discussing the stupidities that are spread around about them. I'll just say one.

In a Moscow suburb - (inaudible) - two girls, 12 years old, two friends committed suicide by jumping out of a window. They were both in love with the same 16-year-old boy, and since they were both friends, they didn't know how to solve this other than to die together. Neither of them was a Jehovah's Witness but in the suburb, there is a Jehovah's Witness community. A criminal case was initiated against he Jehovah's Witnesses - (audio break, tape change) - those who read the local newspapers were shocked by the fact - supposed fact that Jehovah's Witnesses were somehow involved in the suicide of two girls.

This case has been going on for six years, trying to get registration for Jehovah's Witnesses in Moscow. And I say "our case" because I also appeared as a witness in some of their - (inaudible). We organized hearings. We appealed to my acquaintance, the general procurator. So six years of suit, counter-suit, victory, defeat, turning over the - and to this day they're not registered.

Q: In the United States, when a prisoner has problems practicing his or her religion, they file lawsuits. In fact, I think the Supreme Court would probably say there are a lot of lawsuits filed by prisoners, not only on religion but also on many other issues. Do they have this type with regard to religion in Russia where - they call them jailhouse lawyers, where there would be prisoners who were very learned in the law, self-taught, would file lawsuits. Do they do that in Russia with regard -

MS. ALEKSEEVA: Appeals are only considered if prisoners write appeals on their own behalf. And if it's a collective complaint, for many prisoners those complaints are also not considered valid - are not considered - (inaudible).

Q: I'm Sue Taylor from the Church of Scientology. Good to see you again, Ludmila. Just a quick question. As we all know, the religious movements have been attacked and had a very difficult time being registered in Russia, Scientologists included, and we had one church in the early 1990s and we've gone to over 100 throughout the country, but what I'd like to know is - a little switch on this - is what's the good news that you see throughout Russia for new religious movements, and particularly in the city of Moscow - good news?

MS. ALEKSEEVA: Good news?

Q: Good news.

MS. ALEKSEEVA: (Chuckles.) Well, good news. As I mentioned, we did manage to defeat that attempt to introduce Russian orthodoxy as a basis of Russian history in schools, and the Dalai Lama was admitted to Russia even though his movements were limited.

TRANSLATOR: Daniil added, while they'd stopped expelling Catholic priests, and Luda said, well, it was bad news that they expelled them in the first place so it's hard to put that down as good news that they stopped, but - (laughter).

MS. ALEKSEEVA: And I should also say that it's good news that courts usually almost always uphold the rights of religious communities when they go to court. Of course, it's impossible to go to court and to win those cases because there are so many such problems, but at least their rights are almost always upheld in the courts. And of course there are exceptions relating to the Jehovah's Witnesses, as I just mentioned. This is really more an exception.

I must, however, make a distinction that courts tend to be much more tolerant when it comes to those who act on the basis of nationalism. They tend to be much - and chauvinism. They tend to be much more frequent - tend much more frequently to dismiss such cases. Either they dismiss these cases, don't punish those guilty, or give them very light sentences, even in cases where there are severe beatings or killings.

Q: Might I ask - thank you for highlighting the issues regarding attacks on minority faiths and churches and individuals. I'm wondering what you would think is the best role for response from an organization like ours, International Religious Liberty Association, also from the minority faiths in Russia and also from other places. Is there a role to work through? I don't know - the Commission of Human Rights at the U.N. or this organization here or - what do you see is the best role for NGOs in trying to address this issue? That's the question.

MS. ALEKSEEVA: I should say that among Russian human rights groups there are very few that are actively concerned with the problems of religious beliefs. The representative of the Scientologists here I think can confirm what I'm saying, that basically when they go to Moscow, the Moscow Helsinki Group is one of the very few that will discuss with them their problems and will do something on their behalf, but foreign organizations play a very major role in these issues, and foreign political figures who are concerned with religion; they also help the situation.

American members of Congress, particularly from the Helsinki Commission, when they come to Moscow they always raise issues about religious freedom, and I think that plays an important role - restraining factor. At least they can hear how other countries approach this issue, because after all they really don't have any idea, so that's very important.

Q: Charlie Fenyesi, The Bigotry Monitor. You mentioned an incident, I believe in Uromosk (ph), a priest baptizing the non-orthodox - (unintelligible). Was there a follow-up on that, and is he still around teaching?

MS. ALEKSEEVA: The parents complained. And this priest was not teaching; he just appeared in the school. I'm not sure one can remove baptisms so maybe these children are still baptized. (Laughter.) The Tatar political party, Vaton (ph), asked me to be their representative, and now this case is awaiting consideration at the European Court for Human Rights.

Q: I'm Sarah Stern with the American Jewish Congress. First of all I want to convey for the entire group a profound, profound gratitude for what you've been doing your entire life. I also have to tell you that I grew up without very many relatives at all because my family on both sides of my family, most of them perished in the gas chambers at Auschwitz, and had people like you been around, maybe something as horrible as that would never have happened.

And I want to ask you, speaking of Auschwitz, we had adopted - my husband and I adopted some Soviet refusenik families when they - after glasnost, when they were allowed to come to the United States, and they told us that the Holocaust was taught as a crime against the Soviet people and that they had no idea of what happened to - (inaudible).

MS. ALEKSEEVA: Now people just don't talk about the Holocaust today except for - (cross talk) - but officials don't talk about it at all and school courses don't exist on that subject. I'm very ashamed of this but knowledge of the Holocaust in Russia - the information about this subject is not made known by officials or NGOs but just the few Jewish organizations that exist in the country.

The cultural department of the Swedish Embassy is particularly active in this area. They have a very large program about the Holocaust and they travel around the country and conduct seminars for schoolteachers and librarians and teachers of culture. I went and traveled with them to Perm and to Arkhangelsk in the extreme north, and I can testify that the teachers in these cities, they sat there with - the teachers, the local teachers, had their mouths open with amazement because they'd heard something or other about this but they really just didn't know.

They of course had a normal human reaction of horror and they said of course they'll talk to their students about this, but they simply hadn't known and they were very grateful for the fact that they had been informed about this. And in Vologda there was a very amusing situation. This is a very northern city in which there may be two or three Jews living, so it's not a very - actual problem. Nevertheless they listened with huge interest and the program that was developed is very well done. And a young person who had been recommended came to - one young person who just decided to come, a student, someone had told him that, no, there was

no Holocaust, that this was all invention. We provided literature about this and cited this type of literature.

The members of the Swedish delegation listened to him in a very tolerant fashion and then countered all his arguments. But since people in Russia are not very well versed in tolerance, towards the end of the session when this guy again started reciting all of this stuff, that the Holocaust didn't exist, et cetera, the teachers, who had gone through this course, all started shouting at him saying, you know, how dare you say these things, and this fellow then ran out of the building and disappeared into the night. He just had to run away; he had no choice.

Q: I'm Patricia Carley with the commission. I wanted to ask a question about the Moscow Helsinki Group's work more generally. We've all been hearing a lot about the situation in Russia in the past few years and how sort of the path to democracy is deteriorating and a lot of setbacks and almost no press freedom or press freedom finally curtailed and other aspects of democracy that have kind of been obliterated. And so I'm wondering about human rights groups and your own group. Are you feeling increasing pressure? Is there any sense that eventually the authorities may go after groups like yours? And similarly, you've mentioned that the courts have been very successful in - and people seem sort of like the last bastion of democracy almost, where it's functioning in Russia; that the courts are functioning independently. Is there any danger to the courts, to the independence of the judiciary?

MS. ALEKSEEVA: Our main direction is monitoring human rights and the general situation in all 89 areas of Russia, and then monitoring on specific topics. This is a report from 2003 about human rights in Russia's regions. And I took this along because it has a section devoted to the problems of religious believers. And on the CD we have eight reports such as the conditions in prison, psychiatric persecutions, status of women, treatment of the militia. But I should say that the Moscow Helsinki Group never produces materials just on the basis of its staff in Moscow; we always work with our partners throughout Russia. This is our principle. This has created and strengthened a national network of human rights groups.

TRANSLATOR: And your second question? Do you want to explain the question to her?

Q: I'm sorry, I -

(Cross talk.)

MS. ALEKSEEVA: I stress "so far," but so far no one has hindered our work of the Moscow Helsinki Group. Why do I stress "so far?" The process of democratization has been reversed rapidly and it is in rapid pace. One vivid example of this is the, for all practical purposes, destruction of the opposition political parties in Russia, who are no longer represented in the state Duma. And therefore if they need to have a platform they often turn to human rights organizations, including myself, and to human rights leaders. And therefore I often have to act in a role that's unaccustomed to me to take political positions and to criticize various aspects of government policy, and in particular to criticize our president, which in our country is rather rare.

In our controlled media and even in our independent media, or less controlled media, there are two banned topics: Chechnya and the president. So therefore, we're waiting for the knock on our door. But as far as our regional partners are concerned all over Russia, yes, they're experiencing serious difficulties. There are searches, documents and confiscation of documents. There are initiation of criminal cases, raids. As far as I myself are concerned, and the Moscow Helsinki Group, so far attacks have been limited to nasty verbal attacks on me in the media.

So far we have several defenders in the government who have - not in the government; it's close to government - the human rights ombudsman, former Ambassador Lukin, and Ella Pamfilova, the head of the Russian Human Rights Committee (sic). They have helped us and defended us.

MR. MESHCHERYAKOV: The general political situation in Russia is rapidly changing. After Putin's second election, the authorities are now moving against human rights in all areas and against the rights of minorities in all areas. And those people in Russia who are now dissatisfied with the situation in the country include the poorest sections of the population. In the last three months there have been massive protests against the changes in the privileges for the poorest population - economic privileges for the poorest segments of the population. At first they were totally without any organization.

The regional officials are also dissatisfied because the central authorities have removed their ability to control the local budgets. The intellectuals, who are mostly concentrated in the major cities, are also now dissatisfied because they acutely feel their deprivation of civil rights. And of

course the rich as also not very happy because they look to the Yukos situation and fear that their own wealth is insecure.

MS. ALEKSEEVA: (Unintelligible) - only the president and his friends around him.

MR. MESHCHERYAKOV: And then of course in addition, various minorities - ethnic minorities, religious minorities - also are expressing their dissatisfaction because they too - their rights also have been diminished. President Putin's popularity ratings are already beginning to suffer, and one should recall that this is under the circumstances of total control of the media, and I think this situation may proceed very rapidly particularly because further economic reforms, which will badly affect the standard of living of the so-called average person, are planned in the near future.

A key issue for us is that so far the liberal political opposition has been unable to find a spokesman to unite around a spokesman who could lead these various groups that are dissatisfied. So -

Q: A related question -

TRANSLATOR: The last. (Chuckles.) You have the final word.

Q: Thank you. The chamber for NGOs that Putin is trying to put together, what do you think of it and what does he have in mind?

MS. ALEKSEEVA: Putin announced this public chamber at the exact same time that he announced the end of direct popular election of regional governors. I think he did this, as they say in Russia, to sweeten the blow - to sweeten the bitterness. I can't have a respect for a serious attitude towards this chamber because even though the president claims that this will have a monitoring - a controlling function against - on the government, including even on himself, nevertheless the president reserves the right to name all the members - to appoint all the members to this chamber. This reminds me of Baron Munchausen, who proposed to drag himself out of the swamp by pulling himself out by his own hair. The Moscow Helsinki Group

and other leading human rights groups have declared that they will not take part in this chamber.

TRANSLATOR: Many, many thanks. I think I can speak for all of us. And we wish you the best of luck in your important work.

MS. ALEKSEEVA: Thank you.

(Applause.)

(END)